

THE FUTURE OF SPECULATION?

Wesley Phillips

ABSTRACT: The emergence of a philosophical movement amidst the precarious situation of ‘continental philosophy’ is today notable. Whilst welcoming a turn to speculation, and to questions of totality, this article will contend that speculative realism has misplaced the concept of speculation. Its naturalistic sense of totality and of realism prevents it from relating ‘necessary contingency’ to any (future-oriented) task. What, then, is the future of speculative realism? I will examine the extent to which the phenomenon may prompt historical materialism to examine *its* speculative standpoint, amidst the ongoing problem historical totalisation.

My case study is Iain Hamilton Grant’s *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling* (2006), for the reason that it allows for a clear comparison between ‘Schellingian naturephilosophy’ and its competing, Hegelian alternative. Hegel’s speculative philosophy of history faces a set of problems of its own. In contrast to Grant’s reading of Schelling, an examination of the relationship between Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the middle Schelling can address some of these problems. An alternative future to research on speculation will be outlined.

KEYWORDS: Schelling; Hegel; Speculative Realism; Historical Materialism

In today’s professionally precarious context of ‘continental philosophy’, any living debate is, it seems, to be welcomed – especially when that debate involves a turn to the question of speculation. For, philosophical speculation is traditionally concerned with envisioning an unseen whole, and we live in times of need for an alternatively envisioned social whole.¹ I nevertheless wish to argue, from a historical materialist

¹ A version of this paper was given in at the joint Society for European Philosophy / Forum for European Philosophy annual conference at St. John University, York, on 1st September 2011. The organisers stated that the context of the conference was ‘a year in which the UK has seen devastating cuts in the funding of the arts and humanities’.

perspective, that speculative realism has misplaced speculation, albeit in a manner that might prompt its necessary reconsideration within historical materialism.

For the purpose of this critique, a case study will be considered. Iain Hamilton Grant's *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling* (2006) does not represent speculative realism as an entire movement – Graham Harman has in fact referred to a 'loose umbrella term for four markedly different positions', occupied by Harman, Ray Brassier, Quentin Meillassoux and Grant.² But Grant's book serves as the focus in what follows for two related reasons:

Firstly, the author's determination of the real as *the physical* is shared, in one way or another, by each of the speculative realists. Their standpoint – of 'deep geological time' (Grant), or the 'arche-fossil' (Meillassoux) – is avowedly speculative in the sense that the whole it envisions is not directly seen nor produced by the subject – including the philosophical subject (hence 'object-oriented' philosophy). Speculative realism contests the claim of our all-too-humanist modern philosophies that knowledge is ultimately subjective. It implicitly opposes historical materialism, therefore – a critical humanism – not explicitly, however, due to its near non-recognition of historical materialism as such. Harman defines 'continental philosophy' as 'all present-day philosophy that takes its primary orientation from the phenomenological movement'.³ This omission of historical materialism is initially notable, given *its* preoccupation with questions of realism and materialism. On reflection, however, it is less remarkable given that historical materialism is a materialism of social praxis and not only physical matter. These two discourses of materialism thus co-exist awkwardly within (and without) continental philosophy.⁴ In fact, they are more likely to meet in contemporary art – as in the case of Amanda Beech's *Sanity Assassin* (2010).⁵

² Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures*, Winchester, Zero Books, 2010, p. 1.

³ Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, p. 105.

⁴ For another historical materialist reception of speculative realism, see Adrian Wilding, 'Naturphilosophie Redivivus: Bruno Latour's "Political Ecology"', *Cosmos and History*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2010, pp. 18–32.

⁵ The catalogue documenting the Spike Island exhibition contains an article by Ray Brassier as well as interviews with the artist. At one level, Beech is interested in mobilising Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* against the neo-liberalism of contemporary California. At another level, however, she proposes that Adorno's modernist humanism may be complicit with its object of critique, in that the dialectic of enlightenment thesis upholds '*another reason* and ... *another nature* that goes unaccounted for in the work'. Brassier's essay is more explicitly set against Adorno's 'natural theology'. But the new standpoint of critique remains unclear. Is Beech attempting to out-Adorno Adorno? Or is she proposing a speculatively real standpoint beyond human reason, as nature, following Brassier's assertion that 'cultural history is mediated by natural history'? How would speculative naturalism ground the possibility for political judgements about California? The confusion of materialisms is equally evident from Beech's intriguing images and video stills, which remain sympathetic with the outlooks of Adorno and Mike Davis. Amanda Beech, *Sanity Assassin*, Falmouth, Urbanomic, 2010, p. 64, p. 90.

The second reason to discuss *Philosophies of Nature*, therefore, concerns its minimal acknowledgement of this competition between, let us say, natural and historical materialisms. This is a consequence of an overlap in the literature: uniquely among his peers, Grant draws upon German idealism, and it will become important to compare his ‘Schellingian naturephilosophy’ to its competing, Hegelian alternative – that which provides a philosophical opening for historical materialism. A trenchant defence of Hegel is not the point here, however, since a reconsideration of Hegel’s speculation is itself needed. The task, then, is threefold:

(1) To contest Grant’s claim concerning ‘*all* post-Cartesian European philosophy’s elimination of the concept, even the existence, of nature ... a deficiency common equally to Kant and the postkantians’⁶ – taking Grant’s own ‘designation’ of ‘postkantian’ in ‘its broadest possible, i.e., chronological and philosophical, sense’.⁷ Specifically, the treatment of naturephilosophy in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* should be re-articulated so as to pre-empt Grant’s suggestion of ‘egotism’ against historical materialism.

(2) From the standpoint of our flawed historical present, Hegelian speculation does indeed require extensive revision. Hegel scholar Walter Cerf once noted a ‘bizarre’ connection between the ‘earlier’, philosophical and the ‘latter-day’, financial senses of speculation.⁸ Cerf was on to something, if only to the extent that any rescuing of speculation today must incorporate the future possibility associated with its counter-metaphysical, ‘latter-day’ meaning, *without however* forfeiting its ‘earlier’ ambition – of necessity *and* contingency. Quentin Meillassoux has justifiably invoked ‘necessary contingency’ – the traditional charge against Hegel being that there is all necessity and no contingency. But the speculative realist approach does not come up with *really* necessary contingency because its mode of speculation is not concerned – as it is in Hegel and Schelling – with any sort of historical task. What, then, *is* the future of speculation?

(3) Reading Schelling’s entire output in terms of a single naturephilosophy, Grant misses the philosopher’s *actual* rupture of modern philosophy, which (ironically) can begin to address the problem of historical contingency. The middle Schelling experimentally problematises Hegel’s pantheism and panlogicism without aborting the challenge of a historically articulated ‘system of reason’ altogether. Grant understandably rejects the existential readings of Schelling’s ‘system of freedom’. Yet

⁶ Iain Hamilton Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*, London, Continuum, 2006, p. 8.

⁷ Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*, p. 3.

⁸ Walter Cerf, ‘Speculative Philosophy and Intellectual Intuition: An Introduction to Hegel’s *Essays*’, in G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy*, trans. Walter Cerf, New York, State University of New York Press, 1988, p. xi.

he equally dismisses any alternative, ‘Marxian’ account of the period, perhaps because he only considers that of Ernst Bloch – which, being extremely Aristotelian, cannot accommodate radical future contingency.⁹

EGOTISM AS ECONIHILISM

The stated villain of *Philosophies of Nature* is *not* Hegelianism but rather ‘neo-Fichteanism’. But its account of the relationship between Fichte and Schelling actually obscures the rich meaning of speculation in Hegel and after. Grant quite accurately recalls that Schelling confronted Fichte’s identification of the ‘not I’ with passive nature – the consequence of identifying all free activity with the ‘I’ alone. For Grant, that which Jacobi termed ‘speculative egotism’ becomes the nightmare of modern philosophy and of technological modernity at large. The ecological concern is never quite made explicit in *Philosophies of Nature*. Yet Grant’s introduction to Schelling’s *On the World Soul* (1798) in an eco-themed issue of *Collapse* helps to contextualise the meaning of his ‘geology of morals’ (a term borrowed from Deleuze that we shall return to).¹⁰

What we miss from Grant’s critique of Fichte is the manner by which the corrective, *positive* characterisation of nature *proceeds from* Schelling’s *confirmation of* Fichte’s rendering of the fact of consciousness (*Tatsache*) into the act of consciousness (*Tathandlung*).¹¹ Schelling, as a consequence, becomes singularly critical of contemplative speculation, since activity now implies working on nature and thereby changing it – along with it, we might say – rather than either simply observing it or even experimenting upon it.

In fact, Grant reads Schelling *only* in opposition to Fichte, with drastic consequences for his speculative realism: the post-Fichtean element of Schelling’s naturephilosophy allows for the new sense of speculation he will share with Hegel – even though they will indeed turn this against Kant and Fichte. Without this account, we are left with the older, contemplative understanding of metaphysical speculation,

⁹ Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*, p. 46.

¹⁰ Iain Hamilton Grant, ‘Introduction to Schelling’s *On the World Soul*’, *Collapse*, vol. 6, 2010, pp. 58–65. The editor introduces the issue as follows: ‘There is a timely aspect to this inquiry: Whereas the optimism of the late twentieth century saw “globalisation” become a byword for limitless expansion, our image of the global in the first decade of the twenty-first century was characterised instead by contraction, by a forced recognition that the increasing technological interconnection and ever intensifying exploitation of the Earth by humans was exposing finite limits, economic and ecological, of the planet upon which their world-systems are imposed’.

¹¹ J. G. Fichte, ‘Review of Aenesidemus’, in (eds.), George di Giovanni and H.S. Harris, *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism*, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing, 2000, p. 141.

which leads to a certain methodologism in Grant's study. Hence, 'the principle *method* of naturephilosophy consists in "unconditioning" the phenomena'. Relatedly, Meillassoux defines the 'speculative' as 'every type of thinking' – not acting, we note – 'that claims to be able to access some form of absolute'.¹²

In direct contrast to this approach, the collective 'system programme' of Hegel, Schelling and Hölderlin was not a programme for thinking alone. Their revolutionised sense of speculation, from contemplation of the stars to reform of the worldly, is overlooked by today's speculative realism – a philosophy that, we are told, 'refuses to interrogate reality through human (linguistic, cultural or political) mediations of it'.¹³ We recall that Kant similarly could not extend his *Critique* to *speculative* reason precisely on account of *his* contemplative determination of *pure* reason (in terms of the hierarchical gap between reason and the understanding). Grant's 'geology of morals' does not oppose 'Kanto-Fichteian philosophy', as he has it, but rather remains structurally within the sphere of Kant's pre-political metaphysics.

The author of *Philosophies of Nature* acknowledges the plurality of Schelling's 'several systems, each of which is a philosophy of the Absolute or unconditioned'.¹⁴ But Grant skates over the crucial transition from the Fichteian system (1795–7) to the parallel system of transcendental idealism and the philosophy of nature (1797–1800). This should be understood according to the postkantian, not neoplatonic problem of the unconditioned. Specifically, Schelling's 'potencies' remain meaningless without a sense of *the task of science* – *Wissenschaft*, which includes but is not limited to the natural sciences. Rather than following through Schelling's own critique of Fichte – in 'Of the I as the Principle of Philosophy, or On the Unconditioned in Human Knowledge' (1795) – the author mounts his critique on behalf of a version of the subsequent Schelling. It remains important that *Philosophies of Nature* foregrounds Schelling's critique of 'somatism' (thing-ism). Fichte's 'genetic' determination followed from a mechanistic view of nature (one thing determining another). But the critique of Fichte is in that case mounted from the standpoint of a speculative physics, not a synthesis of physics and metaphysics, thus obscuring Schelling's own meta-physical critique of subjectivism as set up in 'Of the I' and developed in the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800).

'Of the I' (1795) brings out the incomplete task of freedom in the wake of Kant. After Reinhold, the idealists knew that Kant is best read backwards, from the primacy

¹² Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier, London, Continuum, 2008, p. 34.

¹³ *Urbanomic* website, accessed at <http://www.urbanomic.com/event-ufi2-details.php> on 2 September, 2011.

¹⁴ Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*, p. 1.

of the practical to the theoretical: the regulative *use* of reason must figure in apperception (and the schematism) *if* the understanding is to be free – if there is to be *Wissenschaft*. Fichte thus re-describes apperception in terms of his unconditioned *Tathandlung*, that which ‘does not and cannot appear among the empirical states of our consciousness, but rather lies at the basis of all consciousness alone and makes it possible’.¹⁵ What we get in addition from ‘Of the I’ is the *cosmological*, as well as psychological significance of the unconditioned – since the unconditioned can be *either* a first condition, the idea of freedom, or the whole of conditions, the idea of the cosmos. Against Kant’s intentions, the transcendental deduction is itself now ensnared in the antinomy of reason – hence the obsession amongst his successors with the discovery of a ‘first principle’.

From the time of their *Critical Journal*, Schelling and Hegel would contend that the Kantian antinomy collapses-in on its infinite insolubility. Subject and cosmos alike implode into nothingness – hence Jacobi’s charge of nihilism. It’s this bad infinity that motivates the revival of speculation in German idealism – envisioning the whole *against* the crippling dualisms of finite and infinite, nature and freedom, and so on. At the same time, speculation could not be as it was before Kant’s overall critique of metaphysics (nor, for that matter, as it was before the revolutions of France and America). Speculation, like metaphysics, moves from space into time – a revolution that the speculative realists seem to want to undo.

THE METAPHYSICS OF THE GEOLOGY OF MORALS

Kant himself had attempted to describe the antinomy in *productive* terms. The ideas of reason are, he writes, ‘given as a problem’ – both ‘*Problem*’ and, more commonly, ‘*aufgegeben*’, from *Aufgabe* or task. This involved an unconvincing distinction between the infinite and the indefinite progression through the series of conditions. Dissatisfied, no doubt, Kant would propose an alternative, in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). The ‘universal realm of ends’ rested upon a composite idea of nature: mechanical and organic, legislated and legislating. Kant thus claimed to have avoided egotism on the one hand and Spinozism on the other by modelling moral freedom upon a dynamic idea of nature. But crucially, this dynamism remained *cyclical* and never *developmental*. The generations cannot learn from their ancestors, nor pass on their moral goodness, since morality is the sole concern of individual, rational cognition. There is no historical task as yet.

¹⁵J. G. Fichte, *Science of Knowledge: With the First and Second Introductions*, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 93.

Now, Darwin put an end to the ‘cyclical nature versus developmental history’ model. But the temporalities invoked by the words *nature* and *history* must be sufficiently differentiated to account for the transformation of our living environment in the last one-hundred, let alone one-hundred thousand years (else we will just have to substitute these words for others, leaving the problem itself untouched). We know of one kind of being on earth that has produced its means of production, though this is not to deny the possibility of other such beings elsewhere in the cosmos, as is sometimes alleged of *all* forms of humanism (Adorno thus wrote of ‘the melancholy hope for other stars, inhabited by happier beings than humans’).¹⁶

So we may, it is true, speak of development in nature and cyclicity in history. But it’s the *more* cyclical temporality of ‘nature’ that provides all forms of transcendental naturalism with stable grounds (literally) for their epistemological and moral perspectives – as in the metaphysics of morals *and* the geology of morals. Grant intriguingly seeks to bring the transcendental down to earth, as ‘the surface of the world’. This remains a form of transcendental naturalism nonetheless: hence, ‘Transcendental Geology’.¹⁷ And on account of the disavowal of any distinctive concept of history, Grant ends up describing a temporality inapplicable to our changing modernity – that which he sets out to in some way to correct. The geology of morals comes up against the same problem faced by Kant’s metaphysics of morals – the absence of a determinate task.

My suggestion is that naturalism, transcendental or otherwise, cannot get to grips with speculation, since it cannot account, in any systematic (whether descriptive or prescriptive) way, for world-historical change. Moreover, those natural grounds are themselves shifting as a consequence of human activity. Schelling, however, sees the two as connected. The *task* introduced by Kant must be historically substantiated, not rejected:

It is difficult not to be enthusiastic about the great thought that, while all the sciences, the empirical ones not excluded, rush more and more toward the point of perfect unity, mankind itself will finally realize, as the constitutive law, the principle of unity which from the beginning was the regulating basis of the history of mankind.

So it’s the production of knowledge with nature, as history, that marks out Schelling’s task from that of Kant. Schelling speaks of ‘preparing [the way for] that great period’

¹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 154.

¹⁷ Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*, p. 205.

– but not *end*, we should note – ‘of mankind.’¹⁸ His subsequent investigations constitute an attempt to ground this future-oriented task, not merely deepen our understanding of physical matter, beginning with the account of production elaborated in the *System of Transcendental Idealism*.

REAL OPPOSITION

What marks out ‘Of the I’ from the writings of Kant and Fichte is its active sense of a condition: ‘*Bedingen* means the action by which anything becomes a *thing* [Ding]’. Conventionally, ‘condition’ translates *Bedingen*, whereas ‘determination’ translates *Bestimmung*. But Schelling’s translator helpfully introduces a Hegelian expression here: ‘*Bedingt* (determined) is what has been turned into a thing’.¹⁹ Fichte could speak of the positing ‘I’ as alone determining reality. But he associated determination with Kantian limitation rather than *Bedingung*: ‘*conditioned* is one thing, and *determined* another’.²⁰ Fichte opposed the contemplative fact of consciousness only to neglect ‘be-thinging’. By contrast, Schelling reads Fichtean determination [*Bestimmung*] in terms of both limitation and condition, in order to tie activity to science. In the *System*, production is modelled upon Fichte’s conflict between ‘I’ and ‘not I’, which constituted (and this is often overlooked) ‘matter [*Stoff*]’.²¹ But if consciousness encompasses ‘the *whole* of reality’ then ‘the “not-I” is absolutely nothing’.²² In that case, asks Schelling, what right has Fichte to propose an external partitioning-out of reality internally to the mutual limitation of ‘I’ and ‘not I’? Part implies whole, as Fichte knows: ‘[t]o *limit* something is to abolish its reality, not *wholly*, but in part *only*, by negation’.²³ Fichte has posited a whole inconsistently with his critical intentions. What remains important is not so much the nature of Fichte’s dogmatism as the fact of it. The infinitely striving ‘I’ (since it must never become ‘not I’) requires limitation. Otherwise the ‘I’ cannot get a hold on the real and there is no task to speak of. This would end up in speculative egotism, were it not for ‘*Stoff*’.

Again, Fichte’s avoidance of the Kantian antinomies *as a whole* allows for this slippage from criticism into dogmatism. Schelling states that dogmatism and criticism ‘form an antithesis’ in their twin response to the problem of the unconditioned. They share this dualism and cannot provide a first principle: ‘The principle of dogmatism is

¹⁸ F. W. J. Schelling, *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays, 1794-1796*, trans. Fritz Marti, Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 1980, p. 68.

¹⁹ Schelling, *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge*, p. 74.

²⁰ Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, p. 50; p. 119.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 109.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

a not-I posited as antecedent to any I; the principle of criticism, an I posited as antecedent to all [that is] not-I and as exclusive of any not I.²⁴ The *Science of Knowledge* oscillates between the two principles. The ‘not I’ is either nothing or it is a thing, each of which are passive. Neither can be seen in terms of a task, since there is no productively unconditioned whole of determinations ‘given as a problem’. Schelling’s critical interpretation of Fichte now applies to (the opening of) ‘Of the I’ also. ‘Intellectual intuition’ provided ‘the form of identity’ between ‘I’ and ‘not I’.²⁵ But Schelling resolved the duality with a new dualism, of form and content, since intellectual intuition remains empty with respect to knowledge. Only later on in the essay does the author move towards a constitutive ‘causality of absolute substance’ and ‘the idea of absolute power’.²⁶ This turn to *Macht* remains unresolved until the *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797) and the 1800 *System*.

Rather than the ‘not I’ being a passive nothing or a passive everything, it must instead constitute a kind of activity (this is speculatively *inferred*, therefore, not completely *seen*). If the productively infinite ‘I’ is to enter into a real task then it must come up against opposition. Schelling now moves beyond Fichte’s position: ‘negation of a positive cannot be done by mere privation, but only through *real opposition*’.²⁷ The ‘I’ is now understood as the active negation of limitation. But such limits (Kant’s conditions) can only be negated insofar as the unlimited whole of possible limits in turn negates the negating ‘I’. Schelling’s claim is at once epistemological, existential and – yes – ontological. Though inconsistent in this regard, his breaking through of the Kantian antinomy concerns the attempt to determine infinitude as the active negation of finitude, rather than as an unknowable beyond, or as an already known, self-causing thing. This will provide a (if not *the*) key motivation behind Hegel’s negation of the negation.

Positing and negation must be active on all sides, therefore. *This* explains Schelling’s naturephilosophy – not a blind interest in the nature of physical matter. Why not, asks Schelling, look for this infinite productivity in nature, through a blend of speculative physics and metaphysics? The account of productive intuition in the *System* leads in to a ‘deduction of matter’, understood as ‘*forces*’ (magnetism, gravity and electricity).²⁸ The attraction of the concept of force, then as today, follows from the thesis that force is neither a thing nor nothing. Force solves the quandary of the

²⁴ Schelling, *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge*, p. 77.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

²⁷ F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. Peter Heath, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 1993, p. 36.

²⁸ Schelling, *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge*, p. 83.

thing-in-itself without opting for either thing-ism or nihilism. If matter is a flux of forces and not things then spirit and nature share in the activity of ‘un-thinging’ – each partaking of the unconditioned without fully being the unconditioned. In his 1803 edition of the *Ideas*, Schelling writes the following:

Man was not born to waste his spiritual force battling against the phantasms of an imagined world, but rather to exercise all his forces over against a world that has influence on him, that lets him feel its power, and upon which he can reciprocally act. Thus no gulf may be fixed between him and the world; contact and interaction must be possible between them, for only then will man [*Mensch*] become human [*Menschen*].²⁹

We can now say that Schelling gives the lie to speculative realism’s critique of continental philosophy. Schelling and Hegel did away with the distinction between subjective activity on the one side and objective passivity on the other a long time ago. The recent return to ‘thinghood’ emerged with Harman’s account of ‘equipment’. Harman thus reproduced Heidegger’s (neo-Kantian) blindness to the alternative, more radical attack upon thingism presented in German idealism and, subsequently, in historical materialism. In fact, speculative realism remains closer to ‘mainstream’ continental philosophy than it would like to think. Without any *historical* materialism, Harman’s ‘universal theory of entities’ falls back into a thing-ism of its own: the theoretical pluralisation of entities now precedes their practical pluralisation (for Marx, ‘congealed labour’).³⁰ Why, then, the return to things themselves? Is it an unwittingly masochistic fetishisation of commodity fetishism (Marx’s thesis that commodities take on a life of their own while life turns into a mere thing)? In a reified world of private things/objects – the homes and corporate buildings of Beech’s Los Angeles, for instance – the only possible denial of reification (*Verdinglichung*) lies in its exaggerated irony. But such irony might end up naturalising an historically contingent problem.³¹

Of course, the earlier Schelling is not immune to this ‘naturalisation’ of history too. Are all ‘products’ similarly unconditioned, ‘man’ and ‘world’ alike (the *Ideas*)? How much does the latter ‘reciprocally act’ upon the former? This problem is addressed in the *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* (1799). Schelling explicitly introduces a stratification of products according to their intensities of striving. The philosopher can now have matters both ways: nature as infinite activity

²⁹ F. W. J. Schelling, ‘Ideas on a Philosophy of Nature as an Introduction to the Study of This Science’, trans. Priscilla Hayden-Roy, in Ernst Behler (ed.), *Philosophy of German Idealism*, New York, Continuum, 1997, p. 169.

³⁰ Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, p. 110.

³¹ See note 5, above.

(force) and nature as stratification of beings – with human freedom displaying the greatest activity. The unconditioned ‘is BEING ITSELF, and as such, it does not exhibit itself entirely in any finite product, and every individual is, as it were, a particular expression of it.’ This principle extends to all matters: ‘every material is thus nothing other than a determinate degree of action’.³² But it is not clear how ‘products’ such as ‘water and glass’ are to be considered active in the sense of human freedom. We are back with the problem of nature and history once again.

In ‘Is a Philosophy of History Possible?’ (1797), Schelling had argued that history is but a higher manifestation of nature on account of its further intensified productivity. In the *Ideas*, ‘natural history’ is defined as ‘a history of Nature itself’.³³ But syncretism is *more* problematic than dualism here, as Schelling (unlike Grant) will later realise. If nature is ‘all that has happened’ then no sense of alienation can be inferred – there is no grasp of what the geology of morals is likely to address *as its problem*. Worse still, ‘nature’ now becomes an apologia for all and any kinds of – human – activity.

Against this perpetuation of the nature-history dualism (since Grant merely inverts the alleged subsumption of nature under history), Hegel and the middle Schelling can begin to mediate it. In a sense, what happens conceptually is that the diremption of nature and history migrates towards that of progressive and regressive natural-histories.

LIFE AND SPIRIT

The secondary literature on German idealism tends to underplay the extent to which Schelling’s ‘real opposition’ is fundamental to Hegel. Instead, we find the shorthand of ‘the philosopher of nature’ as versus ‘the philosopher of spirit’. Yet this re-emphasis would propose an exception to Grant’s rule (excluding Schelling) about the ‘postkantian ... elimination’ of nature. Inter-subjectively objective activity – *Geist* – comprises a qualitative intensification of the activity ontologically posited in/as nature. This is not a final rupture *against* nature, therefore, just as Schelling’s stratification provisionally allows for a *relative-qualitative* differentiation between human freedom and the activities of nature. Hegel must equally go beyond Schelling at this point, however, to make real opposition real.

In *Philosophies of Nature*, Grant rightly situates the importance of Schelling’s naturephilosophy above that of Hegel, who gave some ‘difficult’ lectures on the theme. Yet Hegel was as interested in anti-somatist physics as Schelling. In Force and

³² F. W. J. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Keith R. Peterson, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2004, p. 23.

³³ Schelling, *First Outline*, p. 53.

the Understanding – an early chapter of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* – the concept of force once again serves to eschew the simple opposition between things on the one hand and either nothing or everything on the other. It is true that Hegel's speculative physics falls behind that of Schelling at this point, but not without good reasons. Hegel is interested in how the understanding discovers itself *in* nature through scientific laws, only for that too-rational understanding to become restless with the ensuing 'tautology' – leading to 'infinity' and the 'simple essence of *life*'.³⁴ The cyclical form of 'life' is confirmed a few of pages on, where Hegel defines 'desire' in terms of a consuming relation to the other – desire as 'simple negation'.

Hegel is overlaying different narratives at this point, but we do seem to encounter a break out of cyclical nature (animal subsistence) into developmental spirit (human history), providing ammunition for Grant's postkantian denigration of nature thesis. However, real opposition can and perhaps must emerge as a culmination of nature into spirit – an 'absolute' negation of the negation in the genus, as Hegel puts it. For, when another self-consciousness comes on the scene natural consciousness ceases to have been a bad infinity after all:

In the sphere of Life, which is the object of Desire, *negation* is present either *in the other*, viz in Desire, or as a *determinateness* opposed to another indifferent form, or as the inorganic universal nature of Life. But the universal independent nature in which negation is present as absolute negation, is the genus as such, or the genus as *self-consciousness*. *Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness*.³⁵

It takes another self-consciousness, the otherness of self-consciousness, to sufficiently enact the negation of the negation. Real opposition is socially constituted, whereby sociality does not exclude nature but, on the contrary, requires its interaction.

SPECULATIVE HISTORICAL MATERIALISM?

Hegel did not put his debate with Schelling to rest with the publication of the *Phenomenology* (after which their correspondence ended). Between 1809 and 1815, Schelling would confront the dogmatic pantheism inherent to his previous systems and to those of Hegel. On the historical materialist reading of the *Phenomenology*, the whole is conceived as a totality of negations of negations in an unfolding social process. The whole is history. But Hegel has solved one problem only to introduce another: what is the standpoint of this totalisation, given that progressive – rational – history is by no means given, in 2012 as in 1812?

³⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1998, p. 100.

³⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 110.

The concern for historical materialism, in spite of Marx's differentiation between history and pre-history, is that totalisation might not be historically groundable after all, and must instead be constituted in other ways: whether logically, transcendently or naturally. The 'Consciousness' chapter of the *Phenomenology*, a blend of all three, becomes a transcendent(al) logic of phenomena – individual, universal, particular – and ceases to provide any genuine phenomenology of 'the experience of consciousness'. Natural consciousness is not strictly speaking a standpoint (no *real* opposition), so it can offer no critical grounds of itself to confer synthetic unity upon the universal, that which is taken to a higher level in 'Self-Consciousness' (only to be retrospectively confirmed). Yet Hegel does just this from the outset. In 'Perception', we read that, '[o]n account of the *universality* [*Allgemeinheit*] of the property, I must ... take the objective essence to be on the whole a *community* [*Gemeinschaft*]'.³⁶ Universality always sides with community, the *Allgemeine* with the *Gemeinschaft*, as if the synthetic operation had taken place prior to its very operability. Unfortunately for Hegel, the 'free matters' of all possible properties paves the way for the 'interchange of forces' in 'Force and the Understanding', and hence infinity, life and – spirit. In the midst of the master-slave dialectic, Hegel admits that, '[i]n this movement we see repeated the process which represented itself as the play of forces, but repeated now in consciousness [*sic*]'.³⁷

After 1809, Schelling no longer discerns irrevocable progress in world history: 'Does not everything bear witness to a *fallen* world?'³⁸ The treatise on freedom and the *Stuttgart Seminars* acknowledge the contingency qua spirit of historical suffering without quite valorising that contingency – neither negatively in terms of existentialism, nor positively in terms of Hegel's 'slaughter-bench' of history.³⁹ And in the *Ages of the World*, Schelling experimentally deepens, does not reject the problem of history, proposing that 'the future is intimated' from a structurally mythic past and present.

Elsewhere, connecting the work of Walter Benjamin to that of Hegel and Schelling, I have suggested that the whole might be speculatively grasped through the identification of/with the task of 'counter-tradition' – neither progressive *nor* catastrophic History.⁴⁰ For Schelling, Hegel's 'system leaves to neither the world nor

³⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 70–1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

³⁸ Jürgen Habermas, 'Dialectical Idealism in Transition to Materialism: Schelling's Idea of a Contraction of God and its Consequences for the Philosophy of History', in Nick Midgley & Judith Norman (eds. & trans.), *The New Schelling*, London & New York, Continuum, 2004, p. 55.

³⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, Mineola, Dover, 2005, p. 21.

⁴⁰ Wesley Phillips, 'History or Counter-Tradition? The System of Freedom After Walter Benjamin,' *Critical Horizons*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2010, pp. 99–118.

the individual human *a true future*'.⁴¹ But we still need a Hegelian concept of negation to construe that future in terms of a *scientific* task.

With Schelling's negative philosophy of the 1830s, the tension of his middle, historical system dissipates (this is a retrospective judgement, given that most of these middle works were not published at the time). Ironically, it was the later Schelling's 'existential' critique of Hegel's historical system that drew the attention, then scorn, of several young Hegelians – when Schelling assumed Hegel's philosophy chair in Berlin. But that materialist sublation of idealism (Feuerbach, Engels, even the early Marx) has tended to displace the quandary of a historical system of reason as such – a quandary that remains internal *both* to idealism *and* to that materialism. This has obscured the moment of decision between Schelling and Hegel (which is no less than a decision in the history of metaphysics, as Heidegger would have said).

In his final letter to Hegel of 1807, having received a copy of the *Phenomenology*, Schelling confesses not to have understood Hegel's concept of 'the concept'.⁴² He later comes to regard 'existence' as antinomical to thought, encouraged, perhaps, by the fact that, after the *Science of Logic*, Hegel's concept (or 'notion') loses its spirit (inter-subjectivity). It is possible to say, therefore, that the genesis of historical materialism in the dissolution of classical German philosophy emerges from the unfinished, Parmenedean business of the 'system-programme' – the identity of thought and being. In his translation of the *Phenomenology*, A. V. Miller renders the '*begrifflich*' ('conceptual') identity of thought and being as 'speculative' identity. The speculative is where the decision in question is to be investigated. This would constitute an attempt to philosophically inform a speculative historical materialism.

C/ Princesa, 15, 1-2
Barcelona, 08003
Spain
wesleyjphillips@hotmail.com

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⁴¹ F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, trans. Bruce Matthews, New York, State University of New York Press, 2008, p. 66. Italics added.

⁴² H. S. Harris, *Hegel's Ladder, Vol. 1: The Pilgrimage of Reason*, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing, 1997, p. 42.

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